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Crafting a Poetic Museology

Pour une poétique de la muséologie

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Crafting a Poetic Museology

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Abstract

Museological scholarship that engages an audience which must be persuaded to read a given text requires as much craft as any creative work. Scholars, like any professional writers, can learn and practice the techniques of this craft, many of which are touched on here, revising their work for clarity and grace. Why write clearly as well as thoughtfully? Because thought without communication has no impact on the world—and the world needs experts who can communicate the importance of aesthetics for civil society today.

Key words: stylistics, writing, clarity, poetics

Resumen

La erudición museológica que involucra a una audiencia que debe ser persuadida a leer un texto dado requiere tanto arte como cualquier trabajo creativo. Los eruditos, como cualquier escritor profesional, pueden aprender y practicar las técnicas de este arte, muchas de las cuales se tocan aquí, revisando su trabajo para la claridad y la gracia. ¿Por qué escribir claramente así como pensativo? Porque el pensamiento sin comunicación no tiene ningún impacto en el mundo, y el mundo necesita expertos que puedan comunicar la importancia de la estética para la sociedad civil de hoy.

Palabras clave: estilística, escritura, claridad, poética

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François Mairesse asks in his 2017 conference call for a poetics of museology, "Can we find in museum literature an admirable creative breath…or are we doomed to gloomy and technocratic gibberish?" As a professor of English studies who directs a professional writing program and teaches rhetoric and style, I say that yes, persuasive, engaging writing is possible, and desirable, if we are to have an impact beyond the small circle of people who feel they *must* read us. Clarity and grace are not antithetical, nor are vivacity and scholarship, and there are indeed specific techniques we can master to cut the gibberish and write with force. As Mairesse notes, strong writing is not merely an aesthetic pleasure, it is the way to ensure that our insights circulate and have an impact. No one quotes—or remembers—what they cannot understand.

Am I saying that memorable style is more important than a great idea? This debate has raged in the field of rhetoric through two millennia. The Greek philosophers Socrates and Gorgias asked each other, "Do you need to communicate well, or is thinking well the only honest pursuit?" Or at least they did in Plato's retelling of the debate. Plato, Socrates' student, fell squarely on the side of thinking well—but he conveyed that message in beguiling little dialogues that we still read with pleasure 2500 years later.

The ancient Roman rhetor we know as Longinus called this attention to the poetics of language *hypsos*, the elevation we often translate as "sublimity." Sublimity, he wrote, would move an audience to *ekstasis,* would put it "out of place." Longinus' point was that great ideas required elevated language, in which a confluence of passions and careful attention to rhythm and diction could knock an audience off balance, moving it to take a new stance and, thus, look at the idea presented in some new way, moving it even, perhaps, to action.

Modern rhetorical theory, which springs in the West from the work of 20th century rhetorician Kenneth Burke, examines just what it means to combine logical argument with emotional appeal and personal authority in the cauldron of language. For Burke--who was both a literary critic and a social activist, and who wanted his writing to make a difference in the world--the wedding of eloquent language to persuasive thought was critical: You simply could not convince people to change their ideas if you didn't first sweep them along with language.

I'll come back to Burke later, but let me first dive into a variety of techniques I teach and use myself to make prose eloquent and, therefore, persuasive to an audience. I will group my points around classical rhetoric's 2500-year tradition of three kinds of appeals to an audience—*logos,* appeals to their logical mind, *pathos,* appeals to their emotions, and *ethos,* appeals to their desire to believe in you, the speaker or writer.

To appeal stylistically to an audience's *logos*, their innate sense of logical reasoning, you need first to make it absolutely clear what your argument is about. In other words, you need a *clear thesis statement*, a topic and your argument on that topic—and you need it early. This may seem rudimentary, but I can't count how many professional pieces I've edited over the years—including my own—that bury the thesis on page 6 or, worse, avoid it altogether. Why is it so hard for us to write a clear thesis statement? Linguist Steven Pinker calls it The Curse of Knowledge: "a difficulty in imagining what it is like for someone else not to know something that you know" (2014, p. 59). Psychological studies show that we all unconsciously fall prey to this, "mistakenly assum[ing] that [our] private knowledge and skills—the words and facts [we] know, the puzzles [we] can solve, the gadgets [we] can operate—are second nature to everyone else, too" (p. 60). We know what we're writing about, and we know our stance on that topic; surely it is obvious to the audience as well. But an audience needs its writer to make it clear what the argument will be, early on, because it is the scaffolding they use to understand the building the writer is constructing, and it tells them why they're bothering to read all the rest of that lovely intelligent prose.

Here is the thesis statement of Hughes de Varine-Bohan's article "The Modern Museum": "Instead of being there for the objects, museums should be there for people" (2015, p. 77). Concise, balanced, clear, therefore memorable. Indeed, de Varine's full thesis paragraph applies two other key rules of eloquent writing to set up that thesis sentence: *vary sentence lengths* and *add end-punches*. His lead-in sets up the thesis with two long sentences laying out the status quo that he wants to upend: "The museum was there for the objects and the public was authorized, sometimes paying a high price for the privilege, to contemplate these objects without touching them and often without understanding them. We propose that the order of the factors be reversed and that the starting point be the public, or rather two types of user—society and the individual. *Instead of being there for the objects, museums should be there for people*" (p. 77, emphasis mine). Notice that his short end-punch thesis sentence isn't even strictly necessary: it is repeating the information in the previous sentence, but it is doing so in a more memorable way. This is the power of sentence-length variety and end-punches.

Notice as well that I called the thesis "scaffolding" for the argument "building." I'm using a key rhetorical trope for logos appeals, the *metaphor*, the description of something abstract and unknown in terms of something concrete and known. Duncan Cameron's classic "The Museum, a Temple or the Forum" is a quintessential example of the use of metaphor. His whole argument is based on setting up the supposed dichotomy of stuffy *temple* vs. frivolous *funfair*, and then proposing a third way, the dialoguing *forum*. Notice how well this carefully chosen metaphor works for his argument: the forum is, in classical architecture, a public space nearby-but-outside the temple, and as Cameron argues, "While our bona fide museums seek to become relevant, maintain-

ing their role as temples, there must be concurrent creation of forums for confrontation, experimentation, and debate, *where the forums are related but discrete institutions*" (1971, p. 68, emphasis mine). His temple/forum metaphor encapsulates whole concepts in concrete, visual entities. Museologists should be particularly expert at metaphor because our museums are filled with such symbols--concrete visual entities that encapsulate large, complex ideas. That carving of a king or a god, that historical breastplate or famous gown, are all *so* much more than merely hunks of stone, wood, metal, or fiber. We can have the same effect with our words.

That leads to the next appeal to logical reasoning: the use of *clear topic sentences*. Feamster and Gray, in an article on improving academic writing, argue for thinking of the thesis as the ground floor and the topic sentences as the frame of the building above it. Write the topic sentences of each paragraph first, they say, and only later fill in details. "Your 'paper' should roughly make sense if you read these topic sentences in sequence," they advise. "If reading your topic sentences in sequence doesn't make sense, something is wrong with your flow" (2013). Personally, I can't write this way—it's too much like outlining—but what I advocate instead is to *gloss*, to go back after writing the first draft and read the topic sentences of each paragraph, making sure that the flow of the argument moves in a logical persuasive way.

Here, for instance, are the topic sentences to the first six paragraphs of Bruno Brulon Soares' article "Museums as Theme Parks":

In the land of unimaginable experience designed by fairy tale, or in the heart of a museum exhibition, fantasy, as an artifice of the mind, is responsible for the creation of new worlds of imagined meaning within the well-known reality.... Museums are supposed to be imagined and not just created or developed.... The focus of this paper is the study of museums as social agents that produce performances....Theme parks, as much as many museums, alter the perception individuals have of themselves, of their own bodies and space....The cultural performance [instantiates] a reflexive perspective to the social order in which, like in many successful museums or musealized sites, the audience is allowed to confront its place in history and in society....By comparing museums with theme parks and highlighting the value of reflexive experience, the present analysis aims to deconstruct the notion of museums as informational institutions and to propose a new frame for museology's subject of study. (2016, pp. 17-18)

These sentences need not be always the first in the paragraph, note, but they are the ones clearly carrying the point—and they flow here from general imagination to museums to theme parks to the promise to compare museums to specified aspects of theme parks. The longer the piece, the more the need to gloss during revision to maintain this kind of clear flow to the argument. Doing so alerted me in revision to several sections of this very article that I had first written down as they occurred to me, only to determine later that their logical place in the flow of the argument as written was someplace quite different.

Next, you can fill in the scaffold—adding the walls, floors, curtains, etc.—with a method for paragraph development called by the acronym P.I.E., or *Point, Illustration, Explanation*. In brief, PIE reminds us that, again, each major paragraph has a topic sentence, the Point, that extends the thesis. This Point is then made concrete by adding to the paragraph an Illustration—that is, statistics, a description, a quote, an anecdote or story. The Illustration is the bulk of the paragraph, making clear and concrete the abstract ideas in the topic sentence. The E of PIE, the Explanation, then, is the pause to clarify how or why the Illustration supports the Point. The Curse of Knowledge often keeps us from including an explanation, since it is so obvious to us what the illustration means or why we included it. But our readers do not live in our heads, so the explanation, a sentence or two clarifying the ties, allows an audience to reason through the argument—and this is appealing to their logical mind. A simple guide is to try not to end a paragraph with a quote—add a sentence explaining its presence.

As an example, skim through Ann Davis's introductory article to the ICOFOM Study Series 44, "Two Humanistic Communication Theories for Museums, Libraries and Archives." Paragraph after paragraph sets up its point (e.g., "Bauman contends that architects and urban planners have added to the very real difficulties of urban life…" [2016 p. 6] or "As Nicholas Carr describes, perceiving and remembering space and location is linked [to] how navigation works in the mind and memory" [p. 7]). It then illustrates that point with a quote or series of quotes in conversation with each other, and finally it explains the paragraph with a short sentence or two ("This creates a sense of place" [p. 6] or "Space and place, then, seem to have considerable importance for memory and associations" [p. 7]). Point, Illustration, Explanation.

Memorable museum spaces are similarly devised to appeal to visitor logos, I would argue—and we can see in them the museological difference with more linear narratives, in which an aesthetic logos promotes but does not demand adherence to the curated experience. I noticed this logos structure, for instance, in Britain's Imperial War Museum North. The visitor entering the main gallery is encouraged to follow "The Timeline," which narrates a selective account of British history in which World War I leads to World War II, the Cold War, Bosnia, and the present day. The timeline functions as topic sentences, Points, for each advance of the overall narrative. Visitors may opt to break away from the timeline at each display and enter a themed room that offers an Illustration—personal stories, examples, artifacts. This more aesthetic experience is curated by Explanations—the visitor is not left to wonder why they are looking at propaganda posters, for instance, they are called to question "What Shapes Our Impressions of War?" And when the visitor is finished with the paragraph/gallery of each war, the timeline narrative is always right there to carry the visitor—if they choose—forward through the experience.

The logos of the IWMN demonstrates a key advantage of the four-dimensional space-time of a museum over a two-dimensional text. The museum can

enable visitors to juxtapose multiple narratives within a larger frame (call it the overarching thesis), not losing the point because competing simultaneous narratives are held not only in the mind but in the eyes and ears as well. It is as if, in reading this paragraph on the IWMN, you could have next to it at the same moment the broader point about appeals to logos and the even broader point about museological poetics—and you might even walk over and interact with my conclusion while keeping this paragraph sight. This is the museum as aesthetic space—something writers on the page must struggle to approximate. Indeed, the IWMN provides an example of the next rhetorical appeal as well, as visitors are presented with Longinus' concourse of passions, ranging here from celebration to hopeless despair, all of which fall under the category of pathos.

The second set of devices for persuasive writing are those that appeal to an audience's *pathos*, their emotional connection to the argument being made. These are the methods used by every good fiction writer. Pathos appeals to the stylistics we often overlook in writing, thinking it an art rather than a craft to learn, or an unnecessary dressing, or simply the trickery used by advertisers. But its techniques are necessary for persuasion and open to all. They include:

Strong language

- Look to your verbs—they are the action words of all sentences, but too often academic verbs are restricted to variations of *to be: Poetics **is** key to good museology* can be more memorably written *Poetics **enlivens** museology*.
- Look also to your nouns. Are they specific? The poet Natalie Goldberg advises new writers to honor the names around them, writing not "trees" but "oaks" or "palms" or "baobabs." The difference matters. And this name is not just its scientific or theoretical name. Working across disciplines, I try to be particularly aware of the possibility of losing my audience, and here a simple device called an appositive is especially helpful. An appositive is a noun or noun phrase that renames another noun right beside it—like saying *The **hutia, a hairy-tailed rodent**, is native to Cuba*, or *I study **rhetoric, the art of persuasive communication***. Experienced readers read over the that extra descriptive information, while new readers bless you for your consideration.
- Finally, be on the lookout for nouns created out of verbs. The linguist Pinker points out that "English grammar is an enabler of the bad habit of writing in unnecessary abstractions because it includes a dangerous tool . . . called nominalization [which] takes a perfectly spry verb and embalms it into a lifeless noun by adding a suffix like –ance, –ment, or –ation. Instead of *affirming* an idea, you *effect its affirmation*; rather than *postponing* something, you *implement a postponement*. Helen Sword calls them 'zombie nouns' because they lumber across the scene without a conscious agent directing their motion" (2014, p. 50).

Luckily for museology, the writers of museum signage often provide some of the best examples of strong language in the service of *ekstasis*, moving the audience to a new stance, because economics dictates that they consider how to draw in their audience. It is easy to focus solely on the transmission of knowledge when trying to capture complex events or artifacts, but numerous guides to good practice have by now emphasized the need to, as writer Elmore Leonard put it, "try to leave out the part that readers tend to skip" (Wallace, 2014, p. 228). Margot Wallace's *Writing for Museums* demonstrates the two forces propelling good writing within the museum: Aesthetically, she notes, "When such respect for wordcraft comes from people who daily rub shoulders with visually exquisite objects and tangibly ingenious displays, writing assumes new gravitas" (ix). And pragmatically, she adds, "As all these words thread through and wrap around your museum, you begin to see how powerfully they can propel your marketing efforts" (ix).

The Kigali Memorial Centre in Rwanda, for instance, in its signage and literature does not say, *Many people were killed in the ensuing genocide* or even worse, *At a certain time, those who facilitated the impact on their brethren significantly expedited the process of such activity and brought about its organization through the means of various devices near at hand.* It says instead, "The perpetrators had promised an apocalypse and the operation which emerged was a devastating frenzy of violence, bloodshed and merciless killing. The murderers used machetes, clubs, guns, and any blunt tool they could find to inflict as much pain on their victims as possible" (2004, p. 20). With the first version we merely nod impassively, with the second we scratch our heads in confusion, but with the third we feel the chaos and pain. Academic writing is, of course, more dispassionate, but memorable academic writing remembers that words have power to move their audience.

Strong descriptions

Creative writers call this *show don't tell.* Rhetoricians Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca speak of rhetoric making "present, by verbal magic alone, what is actually absent but what [the rhetor] considers important to his argument" (1991, p. 177). Is that reference to a museum exhibit *showing* readers scenes full of sights, smells, sounds, tastes, feelings? Or is it telling us *about* those feelings in some abstract place? One creative writing trick is to add to a description one other sense beyond sight. Sound, smell, taste, feeling—with one other sense the silent image is suddenly filled with the laughter of children or the shush of a fan, it is fetid or minty, cool or stifling. It lives. The "you are there" interactive visitor experience is the musealized version of this injunction. The Te Papa Tangarewa National Museum of New Zealand, for instance, can tell visitors of the loss of its forest cover and many unique species with the coming of human settlers to the islands—but the loss is made more sublime, both beautiful and terrible, by the brief experience of walking through its recreated native forest alive with the sounds of extinct birds and

animals. This appeal to pathos is neither window dressing nor trickery but an attempt at *ekstasis*, moving the visitor psychically to new perspectives as the visitor moves herself physically through the descriptive space.

Tell a story

So much can be said, and has been said, about the persuasive and clarifying power of narrative in museum exhibits that I will not bother to recap it here. In expository writing, we may overlook its worth, but an academic description of an exhibit can think carefully about orienting the reader so the space described is clear. A description of a policy decision can consider when is the best moment to begin *in media res*—the middle of the action—and what is the climax it is building toward, as well as who are the actors involved and how do they interact. From the earliest bards, humans have told stories in order to not just entertain an audience but to help it remember and make meaning of its world, and academic writing is enriched when it can incorporate some of that power.

The final set of writing devices are those that appeal to the audience by establishing your *ethos*, your authority to speak. When people accept your ethos—that you are knowledgeable, trustworthy, and have their best interests at heart—research shows they are likely to believe what you're saying based on no other evidence, especially on issues where there is no one definitive answer. But classical ethos is not something one possesses alone, it is something one builds by demonstrating that one is speaking as the audience expects to the audience's values. While scholars can in part rely on their known authority as experts, that authority is built upon a growing body of solid research *and* a style that invites readers to see them as trusted guides. In other words, we demonstrate that we have the audience's best interests at heart by giving them the information they need to follow our argument, not obscuring it with pointless verbiage, and using a tone that reaches out to them with confidence and empathy. You can see why a clear, well-described argument using a conversational tone and understandable words becomes so vital.

Pinker, the linguist, points out that academics often are too self-referential, too self-conscious, when we argue. We become defensive or self-conscious—concerned chiefly, Pinker says, with "being convicted of philosophical naïveté about [our] own enterprise" (2014, p. 28). In other words, we don't want to look foolish, so we load our writing with phrases that make us look both cautious and intelligent—qualifiers like *perhaps or some say*, long Latinate words and convoluted phrases rather than straightforward conversational prose, metadiscourse that speaks about the text rather than just letting the text speak.

Let me give you an example from this presentation. My original metadiscourse in the second paragraph of this essay was heavily self-conscious. I wrote: *I propose, therefore, several avenues to approach the poetics of museology. First, I will examine the question of whether the creative concepts themselves or the ways of evoking them are*

what make for engaging prose. When I revised that the first time, I remembered Pinker's admonition to use a conversational tone to direct my audience's gaze, so I changed those two sentences to *Let's begin with the question of whether great ideas aren't more memorable than engaging prose.* Revising a second time, I realized that in fact I was inviting us to ask a question, so I just wrote the question: *Am I saying that memorable style is more important than a great idea?* This is not simply shortening the prose—it is asking myself sentence by sentence, "What am I really trying to convey?" "In what direction do I want to focus your gaze?"

Focusing the audience's gaze is, in a rhetorical sense, the definition of curatorship. As historian Dominique Poulot writes, "As has been shown by several generations of studies dedicated to the political manipulation of the past and to public uses of history, the collection of any museum is the product of reconstructions based on selection and choice, on selective omissions and voluntary commemoration" (2012, p. 7). Its displays are necessarily partial abstracted memory. As rhetorician Burke put it, in seeking to *reflect* reality they must *select* portions of reality and thereby *deflect* from portions not selected, highlighting particular aspects of the narrated history and obscuring other aspects as the present-day consensus of what matters in the past changes with the times. This was made particularly clear to me during the research for my recent book *Museum Rhetoric,* as the national museums of both Argentina and the Czech Republic closed in part to re-select (reflect, deflect) those aspects of their past more relevant to today's visitors. Exhibits are curated to reflect a reality that achieves a degree of consensus even as they push boundaries and encourage their visitors to rethink their premises. To be persuasive, though, the starting point must be the values and identity of the audience.

For instance, the U.S. National Museum of the American Indian exists to promote a narrative that runs counter to many Americans' expectations—that native peoples have survived into the 21st century, changing with the times yet maintaining important traditions. Its story is a challenge to the traditional American Dream story. Thus, its entryway begins not by condemning non-native visitors but by putting them at ease, welcoming them in dozens of indigenous languages. Informationally it is making the point that native peoples are diverse, but poetically it is saying "welcome"—making its audience feel comfortable with the ethos of trusted guide that will lead them to new perspectives as they travel through the museum.

Several other qualities focus on the audience's comfort and best interests in a written text. First is *readability*, which research agrees is a combination of word length and sentence length. How long should sentences be in a chapter or article? In a general English-language publication, 14-18 words is the average sentence length for maximum accessibility. Of course, academic audiences can probably follow longer sentences. But just because they *can* doesn't mean they *want to,* over and over, nor that they will remember what they read (Canavor, 2016, p. 67). Of course, "average" length does not negate the other maxim of

good writing—vary sentence lengths to maintain interest. It does, though, argue against multiple 30-word sentences.

Pinker adds another layer to readability, noting that "the order in which thoughts occur to the writer is different from the order in which they are easily recovered by a reader" (2014, p. 115). The writer thinks in a web of interconnecting chunks of ideas, images, etc. This web of ideas must be strung into words, already a tricky process, but the words must then also be structured into a tree with orderly branches a reader can follow—and that means a right-branching tree. In a *right-branching sentence*, the main point occurs early on, with extra information added afterwards. Right-branching sentences can thus be absorbed one phrase at a time, with the most complex hanging at the end so the reader does not need to hold it in mind until getting to the point. Their counterpart, left-branching sentences, demand that the reader wade through (and remember) a lot of words before understanding the point—as in *my mother's brother's wife's father's cousin is visiting.* Practically speaking, this means we must resist the academic temptation to split up our main points with too many introductory or interrupting phrases. State the point, then follow up with more information. (To write those sentences in the more confusing, left-branching way, I'd say something like *Practically, speaking, and before we follow up with more information, we must resist splitting up the main points—a common academic temptation—with too many introductory or interrupting phrases before we state our point.*)

The final stylistic aspect of ethos we can discuss here is *argument flow*, the movement of the content from paragraph to paragraph. Attention to flow in an essay is the counterpart to attention to plot in a novel or attention to visitor movement in a museum. In all three instances, the need to present as a trusted guide means that creativity in structure occurs within established borders of audience expectations. The novel's narrator may be unreliable, the museum's entry point may be disconcerting (think of the Jewish Museum in Berlin), but the fulfilled expectation that these will be resolved is what allows the audience to suspend expectations *momentarily* and come out satisfied.

In an essay, the audience is less willing to suspend expectations, and so I tend to follow the classical format recommended by Roman orators like Cicero because we are so familiar with this structure that many of us follow it unconsciously. A Ciceronian argument has six parts:

1. It opens with an *exordium*, a kind of introduction that shows the audience why they should pay attention, and also why they should pay attention to *you*—your qualifications to address the issue. An exordium might begin with a compelling story—almost all history pieces use this opening—a vivid description, a shocking fact or compelling quote, all chosen to move the audience to identify with the topic. It should include (briefly!) your qualifications or personal interest in the topic and establish your trustworthy voice. It often ends with the article's thesis. Its goal is to interest the audience and move it

to support both author and topic. If it is an "introduction," it is only so in the same way that we introduce ourselves on a first date: "Notice me! Want to get to know me better!" not simply "Here I am."

2. The argument moves to the *narrative* background, where the author provides the history or context for the argument—what came before this paper? What does the audience need to understand in order to understand the argument? They're interested, now provide just enough needed context. In scientific papers, this is the literature review.

3. The *partition* may be a short sentence or two in some genres or a whole methods section in others. Either way it describes what the author did and what the audience can expect in the paper itself. Cameron is quite good at this: He opens with an exordium of multiple stories, then asks his main question: Are these museums? And his partition says we need to determine first what a museum is, that no one definition meets everyone's approval, and that therefore "another attempt is made here to provide a definition…that may at least help to clarify the issue" (1971, p. 63). Thus he promises to debunk other definitions and argue for a new one—and the audience can proceed knowing what to expect.

4. Part four is the bulk of the article—the series of *confirmations,* or *confirming arguments*, in the best possible order, building them paragraph by paragraph, which is to say Point/Illustration/Explanation by Point/Illustration/Explanation. This is where it pays off to gloss, reading each topic sentence as you revise, considering whether that point would flow better before the other one, or this point would be clearer if it came later, or this other point has particularly strong emotional appeal for you to save for the end.

5. After all the confirmations, it's time to follow up with their counterpart, the *refutation*. The refutation asks, "What would my critics say?" and addresses those arguments. Addressing critic's counterarguments speaks to the rhetor's ethos by demonstrating that you are not trying to trick the audience into believing your argument, instead presenting the evidence that allows the audience to choose. This is also where you can provide needed nuance to your argument, conceding certain points while still upholding the main thrust of your own, answering objections already in the readers' heads preemptively.

6. Sixth and finally is the *conclusion*, where the goal is *not* to sum up but to tell us why the points being made are important. Why do you care? Why should we care? Why would the world care?

Let me end with a quick example from my own work on my new book *Museum Rhetoric: Building National Identity in Civic Spaces*. Organizing what felt very much like a web-like argument in my mind (and in the original draft!), I followed Cicero's structure to come up with chapters that followed a more linear flow: The *exordium* opens with personal stories from Ethiopia and the Czech Republic to show the scope of the book, pique interest, and also signal that

I've done more than sit at home reading books in a library. It states my thesis that looking at museums rhetorically shows us how aesthetics can mirror and shape national identities that influence the public discourse. The *partition* outlines briefly what I will add to the ongoing conversations in museum studies and rhetoric and sums up each of the chapters to come. Chapter 1, then, is the *narrative* background, providing an overview of the theoretical and historical picture of national museums and discussing their rhetoricity. Chapters 2 and 3 begin the *confirmations*, analyzing museums first as narrative sites and then as material spaces—the verbal and the visual. Chapter 4 takes those two analyses and shows how they combine to promote visitors' identification with the communal identity created in the museum, while Chapter 5 examines how that aesthetic identity builds civic nationalism. That's it for the confirming arguments. Chapter 6, then, is the *refutation*, answering critics' questions about potential hegemony in national museums by considering the role of alternative museums in rebuilding civic identity after a divisive trauma. Finally, the *conclusion* proposes various reasons why—and how—the practice of rhetoric inside the museum matters to the security and justice of the world outside its doors. I don't expect readers to think "Ah-hah! The classical Ciceronian organizational structure!" But I do expect that by following that structure, pieces of the argument will fall into what feels to the audience like their right and proper places, so they can more easily follow my line of reasoning.

You may be thinking that this is a lot to consider when you're just trying to get words on a page, and I agree. When I'm writing, I just write. It's when I'm revising that anything good and stylish happens. So here are my final pieces of advice: Write your ideas. Get the words on the paper. Then revise. *All good writing happens in revision*—creative writers know this but busy academics often forget it. Revise several times, sometimes thinking about words and sentences, sometimes about paragraphs and structure. Solicit advice from peers—this piece was (I hope!) dramatically improved as I worked with the comments of its peer reviewers. And if all the sentence-level stylistics seems too much, simply do this: Whatever you write, cut at least 15% of it by the final revision. I have found repeatedly that cutting 15% of our drafts forces us to naturally eliminate wordiness and strengthen prose.

I could go on, but I'll instead take Cicero's advice and end with why this matters: Why try to write craft prose? Why not just throw around our nominalized verbs and left-branching sentences and sound smart? I think there are two reasons. The first is philosophical, a part of the unease with curation evidenced by David Balzar's recent *Curationism: How Curating Took Over the Art World and Everything Else*—an unease encapsulated in critic Dave Hickey's endorsement of the book as discussing the "current hegemony of curationism, a practice of jumped-up interior decorators who double as priests explaining the gospel to the unlettered masses." Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argued back in 1987 that the Western intellectual was moving from patriarchally "legislating" the grand narrative of a particular history and culture toward more democratically

"interpreting" the varieties of history and culture extant in a locality (1987)—becoming less curator and more educator. This celebration of ambiguity over certainty, and multiple perspectives over one, is an important trend. However, allowing the audience to critically explore *content* on their own is not the same as backing away from *structure*. Expected structure is the helpful guide that allows an audience to follow an argument, even as they are deciding whether or not to agree with its particulars. The role of the poet-curator, I would argue then, is different from that of the legislator, focusing more on visitor experience than visitor knowledge. Balzar argues that we are living in what he calls "the curationist movement," in which institutions rely on so-called experts "to cultivate and organize things in an expression-cum-assurance of value and an attempt to make affiliations with, and to court, various audiences and consumers" (2014, p. 9). He is troubled by this, but as a rhetorician, I view the attempt at value-assurance to court audience as an inevitable component of most successful communication, and while extreme curation is no doubt a problem, so is any extreme. In fiction we see the unease with the curation of an overly directive author in the overly expanded influence of Barthes' "death of the author," and more recently in the temporary infatuation with hyperlinked stories. The well-crafted guidance of plot and story, however, are what promote the concourse of emotions that move an audience to *ekstasis,* from what they already believe to a new stance. In the academic essay, the unease with curation arises when well-meaning writers view poetics as a muse-driven art and resist its craft as too manipulative and rule-focused to be useful. Crafted communication, though, asks its audience to be moved to think by making its points clear and compelling enough for the audience to continue reading. Curated communication is necessary for more thought, not less of it.

The second reason, then, why crafted aesthetic writing is important is that "more passion" and "more thought" have a pragmatic purpose. I've mentioned modern rhetoric's debt to Kenneth Burke. Ironically, though, Burke's most important work, a book he spent all of World War II writing as a treatise for the world on how to overcome war with dialectic, made very little impact when it first came out in 1945 because he couldn't follow his own advice: he couldn't make his writing poetic enough to be persuasive or clear enough to capture the imagination.

In these fraught times, I don't want us to make the same mistakes. I believe that museums are our most poetic of public spaces, sites that ask us to ponder, where multiple intersecting and conflicting acts of communal identification can converge. We who write about such spaces need to be at least as poetic, to communicate to each other about what is at stake and communicate to the world about why what happens in cultural spaces is so important. As Burke put it when he tried to reach people again in 1950, "Indeed, the very 'global' conditions which call for the greater identification of all [people] with one another have at the same time increased the range of human conflict, the incentives to division. It would require sustained rhetorical effort, backed by the imagery

of a richly humane and spontaneous poetry, to make us fully sympathize with people in circumstances greatly different from our own" (1969, p. 34).

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